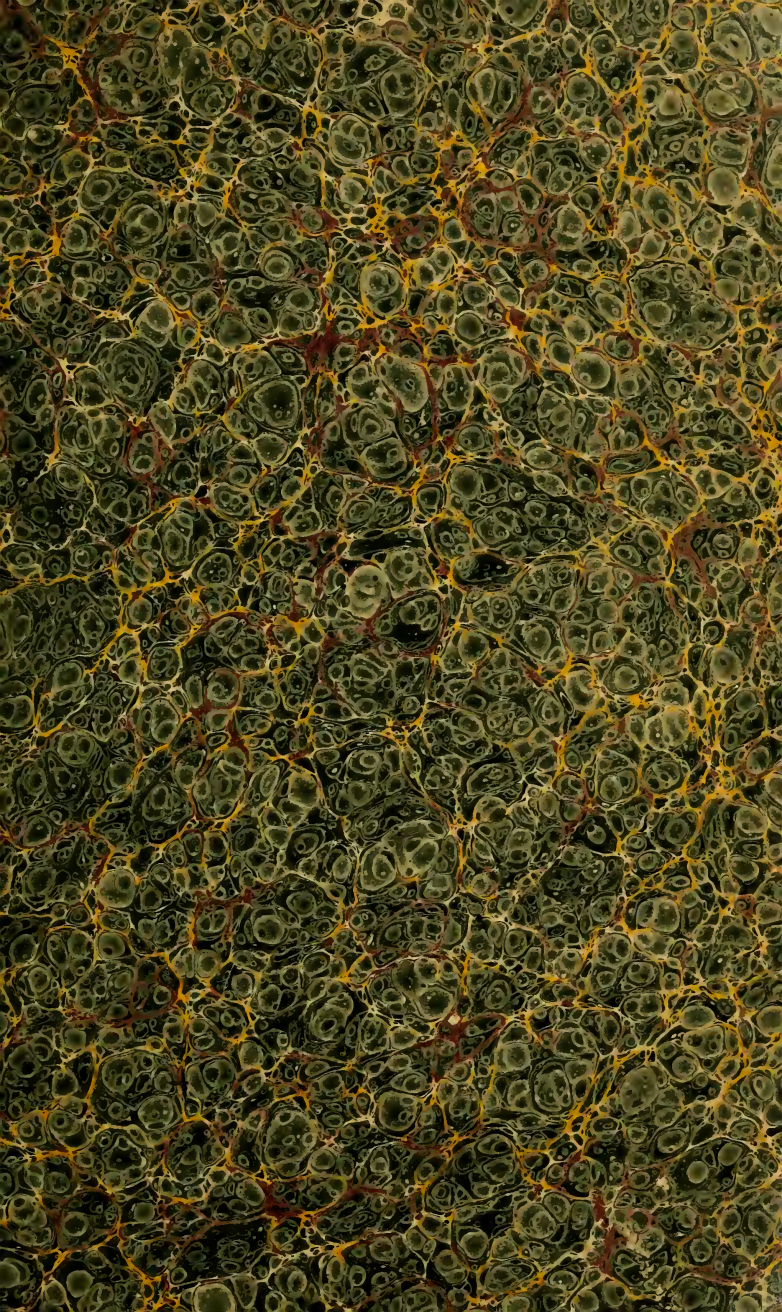


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ON THE

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With AN ODE to GENIUS.

Critical Reflections

ON THE

Old *English* Dramatick Writers;

Intended as a

P R E F A C E

TO THE

Works of M A S S I N G E R.

Addressed to

DAVID GARRICK, Esq;

L O N D O N:

Printed for T. DAVIES in *Russel-street, Covent-Garden*;
JAMES FLETCHER at *Oxford*; and J. MERRIL at
Cambridge. MDCCLXI.




CRITICAL REFLECTIONS

ON THE

Old *English* Dramatick Writers.

To *DAVID GARRICK*, Esq;

S I R,

 T is not unnatural to imagine that, on the first Glance of your Eye over the Advertisement of a new Pamphlet, addressed to yourself, you are apt to feel some little Emotion; that you bestow more than ordinary Attention on the Title, as it stands in the News-Paper, and take Notice of the Name of the Publisher.—Is it Compliment or Abuse?—One of these being determined, you are perhaps eager to be satisfied, whether some coarse Hand has laid on Encomiums with a Trowel, or some more elegant Writer, (such as the Author of *the Actor* for Instance) has done Credit to himself and you by his Panegyrick; or, on the other Hand, whether any offended Genius has employed those Talents against You, which he is ambitious of

B

exercising

exercising in the Service of your Theatre; or some common Scribe has taken your Character, as he would that of any other Man or Woman, or Minister, or the King, if he durst, as a popular Topick of Scandal.

Be not alarmed on the present occasion; nor, with that Consciousness of your own Merit, so natural to the Celebrated and Eminent, indulge yourself in an Acquiescence with the Justice of ten thousand fine Things, which you may suppose ready to be said to you. No private Satire or Panegyrick, but the general Good of the Republick of Letters, and of the Drama in particular, is intended. Though Praise and Dispraise stand ready on each Side, like the Vessels of Good and Evil on the Right and Left Hand of *Jupiter*, I do not mean to dip into either: Or, if I do, it shall be, like the Pagan Godhead himself, to mingle a due Proportion of each. Sometimes, perhaps, I may find Fault, and sometimes bestow Commendation: But you must not expect to hear of the Quickness of your Conception, the Justice of your Execution, the Expression of your Eye, the Harmony of your Voice, or the Variety and Excellence of your Deportment; nor shall you be maliciously informed that you are shorter than *Barry*, leaner than *Quin*, and less a Favourite of the Upper Gallery than *Woodward* or *Shuter*.

The following Pages are destined to contain a Vindication of the Works of *Massinger*; one of our old dramattick Writers, who very seldom falls much beneath *Shakespeare* himself, and sometimes almost rises to a proud Rivalship of his chiefest Excellencies. They are meant too as a laudable, though faint, Attempt to rescue these admirable Pieces from the too general Neglect, which they now labour under, and to recommend them to the Notice of the Publick. To whom then can such an Essay be more properly inscribed than to you, whom that Publick seems to have appointed, as its chief *Arbiter Delic-*

ciarum,

clarum, to preside over the Amusements of the Theatre?—But there is also, by the bye, a private Reason for addressing you. Your honest Friend *Davies*, who, as is said of the provident Comedians in *Holland*, spends his Hours of Vacation from the Theatre in his Shop, is too well acquainted with the Efficacy of your Name at the Top of a Play-Bill, to omit an Opportunity of prefixing it to a new Publication; hoping it may prove a Charm to draw in Purchasers, like the Head of *Shakespeare* on his Sign. My Letter too being anonymous, your Name at the Head, will more than compensate for the Want of mine at the End of it: And our above-mentioned Friend is, no Doubt, too well versed in both his Occupations, not to know the Consequence of Secrecy in a Book-seller, as well as the Necessity of concealing from the Publick many Things that pass *behind the Curtain*.

There is perhaps no Country in the World more subordinate to the Power of Fashion, than our own. Every Whim, every Word, every Vice, every Virtue in its Turn becomes the Mode, and is followed with a certain Rage of Approbation for a Time. The favourite Stile in all the polite Arts, and the reigning Taste in Letters, are as notoriously Objects of Caprice as Architecture and Dress. A new Poem, or Novel, or Farce, are as inconsiderately extolled or decried as a Ruff or a *Chinese* Rail, a Hoop or a Bow Window. Hence it happens, that the Publick Taste is often vitiated: Or if, by Chance, it has made a proper Choice, becomes partially attached to one Species of Excellence, and remains dead to the Sense of all other Merit, however equal, or superior.

I think I may venture to assert, with a Confidence, that on Reflection it will appear to be true, that the eminent Class of Writers, who flourished at the Beginning of this Century, have almost entirely superseded their illustrious Predecessors. The Works of *Congreve*, *Vanburgh*, *Steele*, *Addison*, *Pope*, *Swift*, *Gay*, &c. &c. are the chief Study of the Million: I

say, of the Million, for as to those few, who are not only familiar with all our own Authors, but are also conversant with the Antients, they are not to be circumscribed by the narrow Limits of the Fashion. *Shakespeare* and *Milton* seem to stand alone, like first-rate Authors, amid the general Wreck of old *English* Literature. *Milton* perhaps owes much of his present Fame to the generous Labours and good Taste of *Addison*. *Shakespeare* has been transmitted down to us with successive Glories; and you, Sir, have continued, or rather increased, his Reputation. You have, in no fulsome Strain of Compliment, been stiled the Best Commentator on his Works: But have you not, like other Commentators, contracted a narrow, exclusive, Veneration of your Author? Has not the Contemplation of *Shakespeare's* Excellencies almost dazzled and extinguished your Judgment, when directed to other Objects, and made you blind to the Merit of his Cotemporaries? Under your Dominion, have not *Beaumont* and *Fletcher*, nay even *Jonson*, suffered a Kind of theatrical Disgrace? And has not poor *Massinger*, whose Cause I have now undertaken, been permitted to languish in Obscurity, and remained almost entirely unknown?

To this perhaps it may be plausibly answered, nor indeed without some Foundation, that many of our old Plays, though they abound with Beauties, and are raised much above the humble Level of later Writers, are yet, on several Accounts, unfit to be exhibited on the modern Stage; that the Fable, instead of being raised on probable Incidents in real Life, is generally built on some foreign Novel, and attended with romantick Circumstances; that the Conduct of these extravagant Stories is frequently uncouth, and infinitely offensive to that dramatick Correctness prescribed by late Criticks, and practised, as they pretend, by the *French* Writers; and that the Characters, exhibited in our old Plays, can have no
pleasing

pleasing Effect on a modern Audience, as they are so totally different from the Manners of the present Age.

These, and such as these, might once have appeared reasonable Objections: But you, Sir, of all Persons, can urge them with the least Grace, since your Practice has so fully proved their Insufficiency. Your Experience must have taught you, that when a Piece has any striking Beauties, they will cover a Multitude of Inaccuracies; and that a Play need not be written on the severest Plan, to please in the Representation. The Mind is soon familiarized to Irregularities, which do not sin against the Truth of Nature, but are merely Violations of that strict Decorum, of late so earnestly insisted on. What patient Spectators are we of the Inconsistencies that confessedly prevail in our darling *Shakespeare*! What critical Catcall ever proclaimed the Indecency of introducing the Stocks in the Tragedy of *Lear*? How quietly do we see *Gloster* take his imaginary Leap from *Dover* Cliff! Or to give a stronger Instance of Patience, with what a philosophical Calmness do the Audience dose over the tedious, and uninteresting, Love-Scenes, with which the bungling Hand of *Tate* has coarsely pieced and patched that rich Work of *Shakespeare*!—To instance further from *Shakespeare* himself, the Grave-diggers in *Hamlet* (not to mention *Polonius*) are not only endured, but applauded; the very Nurse in *Romeo* and *Juliet* is allowed to be Nature; the Transactions of a whole History are, without Offence, begun and compleated in less than three hours; and we are agreeably waisted by the *Chorus*, or oftener without so much Ceremony, from one End of the World to another.

It is very true, that it was the general Practice of our old Writers, to found their Pieces on some foreign Novel; and it seemed to be their chief Aim to take the Story, as it stood, with all its appendant Incidents of every Complexion, and throw it into
Scenes.

Scenes. This Method was, to be sure, rather inartificial, as it at once overloaded and embarrassed the Fable, leaving it destitute of that beautiful dramattick Connection, which enables the Mind to take in all its Circumstances with Facility and Delight. But I am still in Doubt, whether many Writers, who come nearer to our own Times, have much mended the Matter. What with their Plots, and Double-Plots, and Counter-plots, and Under-Plots, the Mind is as much perplexed to piece out the Story, as to put together the disjointed Parts of our ancient Drama. The Comedies of *Congreve* have, in my Mind, as little to boast of Accuracy in their Construction, as the Plays of *Shakespeare*; nay, perhaps, it might be proved that, amidst the most open Violation of the lesser critical Unities, one Point is more steadily pursued, one Character more uniformly shewn, and one grand Purpose of the Fable more evidently accomplished in the Productions of *Shakespeare* than of *Congreve*.

These Fables (it may be further objected) founded on romantick Novels, are unpardonably wild and extravagant in their Circumstances, and exhibit too little even of the Manners of the Age in which they were written. The Plays too are in themselves a Kind of heterogeneous Composition; scarce any of them being, strictly speaking, Tragedy, Comedy, or even Tragi-Comedy, but rather an indigested Jumble of every Species thrown together.

This Charge must be confessed to be true: But upon Examination it will, perhaps, be found of less Consequence than is generally imagined. These Dramattick Tales, for so we may best stile such Plays, have often occasioned much Pleasure to the Reader and Spectator, which could not possibly have been conveyed to them by any other Vehicle. Many an interesting Story, which, from the Diversity of its Circumstances, cannot be regularly reduced either to Tragedy or Comedy, yet abounds with Character, and

and contains several affecting Situations : And why such a Story should lose its Force, dramatically related and assisted by Representation, when it pleases, under the colder Form of a Novel, is difficult to conceive. Experience has proved the Effect of such Fictions on our Minds ; and convinced us, that the Theatre is not that barren Ground, wherein the Plants of Imagination will not flourish. *The Tempest, the Midsummer Night's Dream, the Merchant of Venice, As you like it, Twelfth Night, the Faithful Shepherdess of Fletcher*, (with a much longer List that might be added from *Shakespeare, Beaumont and Fletcher*, and their Contemporaries, or immediate Successors) have most of them, within all our Memories, been ranked among the most popular Entertainments of the Stage. Yet none of these can be denominated Tragedy, Comedy, or Tragi-Comedy. The Play Bills, I have observed, cautiously stile them Plays : And Plays indeed they are, truly such, if it be the End of Plays to delight and instruct, to captivate at once the Ear, the Eye, and the Mind, by Situations forcibly conceived, and Characters truly delineated.

There is once Circumstance in Dramatick Poetry, which, I think, the chastised Notions of our modern Criticks do not permit them sufficiently to consider. Dramatick Nature is of a more large and liberal Quality, than they are willing to allow. It does not consist merely in the Representation of Real Characters, Characters acknowledged to abound in common Life ; but may be extended also to the Exhibition of imaginary Beings. To Create, is to be a Poet indeed ; to draw down Beings from another Sphere, and endue them with suitable Passions, Affections, Dispositions, allotting them at the same Time proper Employment ; to *body forth*, by the Powers of Imagination, *the Forms of Things unknown*, and to *give to airy Nothing a local Habitation and a Name*, surely requires a Genius for the Drama equal, if not superior, to the Delineation of Personages in the ordinary

dinary Course of Nature. *Shakespeare* in particular is universally acknowledged never to have soared so far above the Reach of all other Writers, as in those Instances, where he seems purposely to have transgressed the Laws of Criticism. He appears to have disdained to put his free Soul *into Circumscription and Confine*, which denied his extraordinary Talents their full Play, nor gave Scope to the Boundlessness of his Imagination. His Witches, Ghosts, Fairies, and other imaginary Beings, scattered through his Plays, are so many glaring Violations of the common Table of Dramatick Laws. What then shall we say? Shall we confess their Force and Power over the Soul, shall we allow them to be Beauties of the most exquisite Kind, and yet insist on their being expunged? And why? except it be to reduce the Flights of an exalted Genius, by fixing the Standard of Excellence on the Practice of inferior Writers, who wanted Parts to execute such great Designs; or to accommodate them to the narrow Ideas of small Criticks, who want Souls large enough to comprehend them?

Our Old Writers thought no Personage whatever, unworthy a Place in the Drama, to which they could annex what may be called a *Seity*; that is, to which they could allot Manners and Employment peculiar to itself. The severest of the Antients cannot be more eminent for the constant Preservation of Uniformity of Character, than *Shakespeare*; and *Shakespeare*, in no Instance, supports his Characters with more Exactness, than in the Conduct of his ideal Beings. The Ghost in *Hamlet* is a shining Proof of this Excellence.

But, in consequence of the Custom of tracing the Events of a Play minutely from a Novel, the Authors were sometimes led to represent a mere human Creature in Circumstances not quite consonant to Nature, of a Disposition rather wild and extravagant, and in both Cases more especially repugnant to modern Ideas. This indeed required particular Indul-

gence from the Spectator, but it was an Indulgence, which seldom missed of being amply repaid. Let the Writer but once be allowed, as a necessary *Datum*, the Possibility of any Character's being placed in such a Situation, or possess of so peculiar a Turn of Mind, the Behaviour of the Character is perfectly natural. *Shakespeare*, though the Child of Fancy, seldom or never drest up a common Mortal in any other than the modest Dress of Nature: But many shining Characters in the Plays of *Beaumont* and *Fletcher* are not so well grounded on the Principles of the human Heart; and yet, as they were supported with Spirit, they were received with Applause. *Shylock's* Contract, with the Penalty of the Pound of Flesh, though not *Shakespeare's* own Fiction, is perhaps rather improbable; at least it would not be regarded as a happy Dramatick Incident in a modern Play; and yet, having once taken it for granted, how beautifully, nay, how *naturally*, is the Character sustained!--Even this Objection therefore, of a Deviation from Nature, great as it may seem, will be found to be a Plea insufficient to excuse the total Exclusion of our antient Dramatists from the Theatre. *Shakespeare*, you will readily allow, possess Beauties more than necessary to redeem his Faults; Beauties, that excite our Admiration, and obliterate his Errors. True. But did no Portion of that divine Spirit fall to the Share of our other Old Writers? And can their Works be suppressed, or concealed, without Injustice to their Merit?

One of the best and most pleasing Plays in *Massinger*, and which, we are told, was originally received with general Approbation, is called, *The Picture*. The Fiction, whence it takes its Title, and on which the Story of the Play is grounded, may be collected from the following short Scene. *Mathias*, a Gentleman of *Bohemia*, having taken an affecting Leave of his Wife *Sophia*, with a Resolution of serving in the King of

Hungary's Army against the Turks, is left alone on the Stage, and the Play goes on, as follows.

Math. I am strangely troubled : Yet why should I nourish
A Fury here, and with imagin'd Food ?
Having no real Grounds on which to raise
A Building of Suspicion she ever was,
Or can be false hereafter ? I in this
But foolishly inquire the Knowledge of
A future Sorrow, which, if I find out,
My present Ignorance were a cheap Purchase,
Though with my Loss of Being. I have already
Dealt with a Friend of mine, a general Scholar,
One deeply read in Nature's hidden Secrets,
And (though with much Unwillingness) have won him
To do as much as Art can to resolve me
My Fate that follows—To my Wish he's come.

Enter Baptista.

Julio Baptista, now I may affirm
Your Promise and Performance walk together ;
And therefore, without Circumstance, to the Point,
Instruct me what I am.

Bapt. I could wish you had
Made Trial of my Love some other Way.

Math. Nay, this is from the Purpose.

Bapt. If you can,
Proportion your Desire to any Mean,
I do pronounce you happy : I have found,
By certain Rules of Art, your matchless Wife
Is to this present Hour from all Pollution
Free and untainted.

Math. Good.

Bapt. In reason therefore
You should fix here, and make no farther Search
Of what may fall hereafter.

Math. O *Baptista* !

'Tis not in me to master so my Passions ;
I must know farther, or you have made good
But half your Promise.—While my Love stood by,
Holding her upright, and my Presence was
A Watch upon her, her Desires being met too
With equal Ardour from me, what one Proof
Could she give of her Constancy, being untempted ?

But

But when I am absent, and my coming back
 Uncertain, and those wanton Heats in Women
 Not to be quench'd by lawful Means, and she
 The absolute Disposer of herself,
 Without Controul or Curb ; nay more, invited
 By Opportunity and all strong Temptations,
 If then she hold out——

Bapt. As no doubt she will.

Math. Those Doubts must be made Certainities, *Baptista*,
 By your Assurance, or your boasted Art
 Deserves no Admiration. How you trifle——
 And play with my Affliction ! I'm on
 The Rack, till you confirm me.

Bapt. Sure, *Mathias*,
 I am no God, nor can I dive into
 Her hidden Thoughts, or know what her Intentions are ;
 That is deny'd to Art, and kept conceal'd
 E'en from the Devils themselves : They can but guess,
 Out of long Observation, what is likely ;
 But positively to foretel that this shall be,
 You may conclude impossible ; all I can
 I will do for you. When you are distant from her
 A thousand Leagues, as if you then were with her,
 You shall know truly when she is solicited,
 And how far wrought on.

Math. I desire no more.

Bapt. Take then this little Model of *Sophia*,
 With more than human Skill limn'd to the Life ;
 Each Line and Lineament of it in the Drawing
 So punctually observ'd, that, had it Motion,
 In so much 'twere herself.

Math. It is, indeed,
 An admirable Piece ; but if it have not
 Some hidden Virtue that I cannot guess at,
 In what can it advantage me ?

Bapt. I'll instruct you.
 Carry it still about you, and as oft
 As you desire to know how she's affected,
 With curious Eyes peruse it : While it keeps
 The Figure it now has, entire and perfect,
 She is not only innocent in Fact,
 But unattempted ; but if once it vary
 From the true Form, and what's now White and Red
 Incline to Yellow, rest most confident
 She's with all Violence courted, but unconquer'd.
 But if it turn all Black, 'tis an Assurance

The Fort, by Composition or Surprize,
Is forc'd, or with her free Consent, surrender'd.

Nothing can be more fantastick, or more in the extravagant Strain of the *Italian* Novels, than this Fiction : And yet the Play, rais'd on it, is extremely beautiful, abounds with affecting Situations, true Character, and a faithful Representation of Nature. The Story, thus opened, proceeds as follows. *Matthias* departs, accompanied by his Friend, and serves as a Volunteer in the *Hungarian* Army against the *Turks*. A complete Victory being obtained, chiefly by Means of his Valour, he is brought by the General to the *Hungarian* Court, where he not only receives many Honours from the King, but captivates the Heart of the Queen ; whose Passion is not so much excited by his known Valour or personal Attractions, as by his avowed Constancy to his Wife, and his firm Assurance of her reciprocal Affection and Fidelity to him. These Circumstances touch the Pride, and raise the Envy of the Queen. She resolves, therefore, to destroy His conjugal Faith by giving up Her Own, and determines to make Him a desperate Offer of Her Person ; and, at the same Time, under Pretence of Notice of *Matthias* his being detained for a Month at Court, She dispatches two debauched young Noblemen to tempt the Virtue of *Sophia*. These Incidents occasion several affecting Scenes both on the Part of the Husband and Wife. *Matthias* (not with an unnatural and untheatrical Stoicism, but with the liveliest Sensibility) nobly withstands the Temptations of the Queen. *Sophia*, though most virtuously attached to her Husband, becomes uneasy at the feigned Stories, which the young Lords recount to her of his various Gallantries at Court, and in a Fit of Jealousy, Rage, and Resentment, makes a momentary Resolution to give up her Honour. While she is supposed to be yet under the Dominion
of

of this Resolution, occurs the following Scene between the Husband and his Friend.

MATHIAS and BAPTISTA.

Bapt. We are in a desperate Straight ; there's no Evasion
Nor Hope left to come of, but by your yielding
To the Necessity ; you must feign a Grant
To her violent Passion, or——

Math. What, my *Baptista*?

Bapt. We are but dead else.

Math. Were the Sword now heav'd up,
And my Neck upon the Block, I would not buy
An Hour's Reprieve with the Loss of Faith and Virtue
To be made immortal here. Art thou a Scholar,
Nay, almost without a Parallel, and yet fear
To die, which is inevitable ? You may urge
The many Years that by the Course of Nature
We may travel in this tedious Pilgrimage,
And hold it as a Blessing, as it is,
When Innocence is our Guide ; yet know, *Baptista*,
Our Virtues are prefer'd before our Years,
By the great Judge. To die untainted in
Our Fame and Reputation is the greatest ;
And to lose that, can we desire to live ?
Or shall I, for a momentary Pleasure,
Which soon comes to a Period, to all Times
Have Breach of Faith and Perjury remembred
In a still living Epitaph ? No, *Baptista*,
Since my *Sophia* will go to her Grave
Unspotted in her Faith, I'll follow her
With equal Loyalty : but look on this,
Your own great Work, your Master-piece, and then
She being still the same, teach me to alter.
Ha ! sure I do not sleep ! or, if I dream,

[*The Picture altered.*]

This is a terrible Vision ! I will clear
My Eyesight, perhaps Melancholy makes me
See that which is not.

Bapt. It is too apparent.

I grieve to look upon't ; besides the Yellow,
That does assure she's tempted, there are Lines
Of a dark Colour, that disperse themselves
O'er every Miniature of her Face, and those
Confirm——

Math.

Math. She is turn'd Whore.

Bapt. I must not say so.

Yet as a Friend to Truth, if you will have me
Interpret it, in her Consent, and Wishes
She's false, but not in Fact yet.

Math. Fact! *Baptista?*

Make not yourself a Pandar to her Looseness,
In labouring to palliate what a Vizard
Of Impudence cannot cover. Did e'er Woman
In her Will decline from Chastity, but found Means
To give her hot Lust full Scope? It is more
Possible in Nature for gross Bodies
Descending of themselves, to hang in the Air,
Or with my single Arm to underprop
A falling Tower; nay, in its violent Course
To stop the Light'ning, then to stay a Woman
Hurried by two Furies, Lust and Falshood,
In her full Career to Wickedness.

Bapt. Pray you temper
The Violence of your Passion.

Math. In Extreame
Of this Condition, can it be in Man
To use a Moderation? I am thrown
From a steep Rock headlong into a Gulph
Of Misery, and find myself past Hope,
In the same Moment that I apprehend
That I am falling. And this, the Figure of
My Idol, few Hours since, while she continued
In her Perfection, that was late a Mirror,
In which I saw miraculous Shapes of Duty,
Staid Manners, with all Excellency a Husband
Could wish in a chaste Wife, is on the sudden
Turn'd to a magical Glass, and does present
Nothing but Horns and Horror.

Bapt. You may yet
(And 'tis the best Foundation) build up Comfort
On your own Goodness.

Math. No, that hath undone me,
For now I hold my Temperance a Sin
Worse than Excess, and what was Vice a Virtue.
Have I refus'd a Queen, and such a Queen
(Whose ravishing Beauties at the first Sight had tempted
A Hermit from his Beads, and chang'd his Prayers
To amorous Sonnets,) to preserve my Faith
Inviolat to Thee, with the Hazard of
My Death with Torture, since she could inflict

No less for my Contempt, and have I met
 Such a Return from Thee ? I will not curse Thee,
 Nor for thy Falshood rail against the Sex ;
 'Tis poor, and common ; I'll only with wise Men
 Whisper unto myself, howe'er they seem,
 Nor present, nor past Times, nor the Age to come
 Hath heretofore, can now, or ever shall
 Produce one constant Woman.

Bapt. This is more
 Than the Satyrists wrote against 'em.

Math. There's no Language
 That can express the Poison of these Aspics,
 These weeping Crocodiles, and all too little
 That hath been said against 'em. But I'll mould
 My Thoughts into another Form, and if
 She can outlive the Report of what I have done,
 This Hand, when next she comes within my Reach,
 Shall be her Executioner.

The Fiction of *the PICTURE* being first allowed,
 the most rigid Critick will, I doubt not, confess,
 that the Workings of the human Heart are accu-
 rately set down in the above Scene. The Play is
 not without many others, equally excellent, both
 before and after it ; nor in those Days, when the
 Power of Magick was so generally believed, that
 the severest Laws were solemnly enacted against
 Witches and Witchcraft, was the Fiction so bold
 and extravagant, as it may seem at present. Hop-
 ing that the Reader may, by this Time, be some-
 what reconciled to the Story, or even interested in
 it, I will venture to subjoin to the long Extracts
 I have already made from this Play one more
 Speech, where *the PICTURE* is mentioned very
 beautifully. *Mathias* addresses himself to the Queen
 in these Words.

Math. To slip once
 Is incident, and excus'd by human Frailty ;
 But to fall ever, damnable. We were both
 Guilty, I grant, in tendering our Affection,
 But, as I hope you will do, I repented.

When

When we are grown up to Ripeness, our Life is
 Like to this Picture. While we run
 A constant Race in Goodness, it retains
 The just Proportion. But the Journey being
 Tedious, and sweet Temptations in the Way,
 That may, in some Degree divert us from
 The Road that we put forth in, e'er we end
 Our Pilgrimage, it may, like this, turn Yellow,
 Or be with Blackness clouded. But when we
 Find we have gone astray, and labour to
 Return unto our never-failing Guide
 Virtue, Contrition (with unfeigned Tears,
 The Spots of Vice wash'd off) will soon restore it
 To the first Purenness.

These several Passages will, I hope, be thought
 by the judicious Reader to be written in the free
 Vein of a true Poet, as well as by the exact Hand
 of a faithful Disciple of Nature. If any of the
 above Arguments, or, rather, the uncommon Ex-
 cellence of the great Writers themselves, can in-
 duce the Critick to allow the Excursions of Fancy
 on the Theatre, let him not suppose that he is here
 advised to submit to the Perversion of Nature, or
 to admire those who over-leap the modest Bounds,
 which she has prescribed to the Drama. I will
 agree with him, that Plays, wherein the Truth of
 Dramatick Character is violated, can convey neither
 Instruction nor Delight. *Shakespeare, Jonson, Beau-*
mont and Fletcher, Massinger, &c. are guilty of no
 such Violation. Indeed the Heroick Nonsense, which
 overruns the Theatrical Productions of *Dryden* *,
Howard,

* Nobody can have a truer Veneration for the Poetical Genius of
Dryden, than the Writer of these Reflections; but surely that Genius is
 no where so much obscured, notwithstanding some transient Gleams,
 as in his Plays; of which He had Himself no great Opinion, since
 the only Plea He ever urged in their Favour, was, that the Town
 had received with Applause Plays *equally bad*. Nothing, perhaps,
 but the absurd Notion of Heroick Plays, could have carried the
 immediate Successors to the Old Class of Writers into such ridiculous
 Contradictions to Nature. That I may not appear singular in my
 Opinion

Howard, and the other illustrious Prototypes of *Bayes* in the *Rehearsal*, must nauseate the most indulgent Spectator. The temporary Rage of false Taste may perhaps betray the Injudicious into a foolish Admiration of such Extravagance for a short Period: But how will these Plays stand the Brunt of critical Indignation, when the Personages of the Drama are found to resemble no Characters in Nature, except, perhaps, the disordered Inhabitants of *Bedlam*?

If then it must be confessed both from Reason and Experience, that we can not only endure, but attend with Pleasure to Plays, which are almost merely Dramatick Representations of romantick Novels; it will surely be a further Inducement to recur to the Works of our Old Writers, when we find among them many Pieces written on a severer Plan; a Plan, more accommodated to real Life, and approaching more nearly to the modern Usage. *The Merry Wives of Windsor* of *Shakespeare*, *the Fox*, *the Alchymist*, *the Silent Woman*, *Every Man in his Humour* of *Jonson*, *the New Way to pay old Debts*, *the City Madam* of *Massinger*, &c. &c. all urge their Claim for a Rank in the ordinary Course of our Winter-Evening Entertainments, not only clear of every Objection made to the abovementioned Species of Dramatick Composition, but adhering more strictly to antient Rules, than most of our later Comedies.

In Point of Character, (perhaps the most essential Part of the Drama) our Old Writers far transcend the Moderns. It is surely needless, in Support of this Opinion to recite a long List of Names, when the Memory of every Reader must suggest them to himself. The Manners of many of them, it is true, do not prevail at present. What then? Is it dis-

Opinion of *Dryden's* Dramatick Pieces, I must beg Leave to refer the Reader to *the Rambler*, No. 125, where that judicious Writer has produced divers Instances from *Dryden's* Plays, sufficient (to use *the Rambler's* own Language) to awaken the most torpid Risibility.

pleasing or uninstruative to see the Manners of a former Age pass in Review before us? Or is the Mind undelighted at recalling the Characters of our Ancestors, while the Eye is confessedly gratified at the Sight of the Actors dress'd in their antique Habits? Moreover, Fashion and Custom are so perpetually fluctuating, that it must be a very accurate Piece indeed, and one quite new and warm from the Anvil, that catches the *Damon* or *Cynthia* of this Minute. Some Plays of our latest and most fashionable Authors are grown as obsolete in this Particular, as those of the first Writers; and it may with Safety be affirmed, that *Bobadill* is not more remote from modern Character, than the ever-admired and everywhere-to-be-met-with Lord *Foppington*. It may, also, be further considered, that most of the best Characters in our old Plays are not merely fugitive and temporary. They are not the sudden Growth of Yesterday or To-day, sure of fading or withering To-morrow; but they were the Delight of past Ages, still continue the Admiration of the present, and (to use the Language of true Poetry)

—————To Ages yet unborn appeal,
And latest Times th' ETERNAL NATURE feel.

The ACTOR.

There is one Circumstance peculiar to the Dramatick Tales, and to many of the more regular Comedies of our old Writers, of which it is too little to say, that it demands no Apology. It deserves the highest Commendation, since it hath been the Means of introducing the most capital Beauties into their Compositions, while the same Species of Excellence could not possibly enter into those of a later Period. I mean the Poetical Stile of their Dialogue. Most Nations, except our own, have imagined mere Prose, which, with *Moliere's Bourgeois Gentilhomme*, the meanest of us have talked from our Cradle, too little

little elevated for the Language of the Theatre. Our Neighbours, the *French*, at this Day write most of their Plays, Comedies as well as Tragedies, in Rhime; a *Gothick* Practice, which our own Stage once admitted, but long ago wisely rejected. The *Græcian* Iambick was more happily conceived in the true Spirit of that elegant and magnificent Simplicity, which characterized the Taste of that Nation. Such a Measure was well accommodated to the Expressions of the Mind, and though it refined indeed on Nature, it did not contradict it. In this, as well as in all other Matters of Literature, the Usage of *Greece* was religiously observed at *Rome*. *Plautus*, in his richest Vein of Humour, is numerous and poetical. The Comedies of *Terence*, though we cannot agree to read them after Bishop *Hare*, were evidently not written without Regard to Measure; which is the invincible Reason, why all Attempts to render them into downright Prose have always proved, and ever must prove, unsuccessful; and if a faint Effort, now under Contemplation, to give a Version of them in familiar Blank Verse (after the Manner of our Old Writers, but without a servile Imitation of Them) should fail, it must, I am confident, be owing to the Lameness of the Execution. The *English* Heroick Measure, or, as it is commonly called, Blank Verse, is perhaps of a more happy Construction even than the *Græcian* Iambick; elevated equally, but approaching nearer to the Language of Nature, and as well adapted to the Expression of Comick Humour as to the *Pathos* of Tragedy.

The mere Modern Critick, whose Idea of Blank Verse is perhaps attached to that empty Swell of Phraseology, so frequent in our late Tragedies, may consider these Notions as the Effect of Bigotry to our old Authors, rather than the Result of impartial Criticism. Let such an one carefully read over the Works of those Writers, for whom I am an Advocate. There he will seldom or ever find that Tu-

mour of Blank Verse, to which He has been so much accustomed. He will be surpris'd with a familiar Dignity, which, though it rises somewhat above ordinary Conversation, is rather an Improvement than Perversion of it. He will soon be convinced, that Blank Verse is by no Means appropriated solely to the Buskin, but that the Hand of a Master may mould it to whatever Purposes he pleases; and that in Comedy, it will not only admit Humour, but heighten and embellish it. Instances might be produced without Number. It must however be lamented, that the Modern Tragick Stile, free, indeed, from the mad Flights of *Dryden*, and his Contemporaries, yet departs equally from Nature. I am apt to think it is in great Measure owing to the almost total Exclusion of Blank Verse from all modern Compositions, Tragedy excepted. The common Use of an Elevated Diction in Comedy, where the Writer was often, of Necessity, put upon expressing the most ordinary Matters, and where the Subject demanded him to paint the most ridiculous Emotions of the Mind, was perhaps one of the chief Causes of that *easy Vigour*, so conspicuous in the Stile of the old Tragedies. Habituated to Poetical Dialogue in those Compositions, wherein They were obliged to adhere more strictly to the Simplicity of the Language of Nature, the Poets learnt, in those of a more raised Species, not to depart from it too wantonly. They were well acquainted also with the Force as well as Elegance of their Mother-Tongue, and chose to use such Words, as may be called Natives of the Language, rather than to *harmonize* their Verses, and *agonize* the Audience with *Latin* Terminations. Whether the refined Stile of *Addison's Cato*, and the flowing Versification of *Rowe* first occasioned this Departure from antient Simplicity it is difficult to determine: but it is too true, that *Southerne* was the last of our Dramatick Writers, who was, in any Degree, possess'd of that magnificent Plainness, which is

the

the genuine Dress of Nature ; though indeed the Plays even of *Rowe* are more simple in their Stile, than those which have been produced by his Successors. It must not however be dissembled in this Place, that the Stile of our Old Writers is not without Faults ; that They were apt to give too much into Conceits ; that They often pursued an allegorical Train of Thought too far ; and were sometimes betrayed into forced, unnatural, quaint, or gigantick Expressions. In the Works of *Shakespeare* himself every one of these Errors may be found ; yet it may be safely asserted, that no other Author, antient or modern, has expressed himself on such a Variety of Subjects with more Ease, and in a Vein more truly poetical, unless, perhaps, we should except *Homer* : Of which, by the bye, the deepest Critick, most conversant with Idioms and Dialects, is not quite a competent Judge.

I would not be understood, by what I have here said of Poetical Dialogue, to object to the Use of Prose, or to insinuate that our modern Comedies are the worse for being written in that Stile. It is enough for me, to have vindicated the Use of a more elevated Manner among our Old Writers. I am well aware that most Parts of *Falstaff*, *Ford*, *Benedick*, *Malvolio*, &c. are written in Prose ; nor indeed would I counsel a modern Writer to attempt the Use of Poetical Dialogue in a mere Comedy : A Dramatick Tale, indeed, chequered, like Life itself, with various Incidents, ludicrous and affecting, if written by a masterly Hand, and somewhat more severely than those abovementioned, would, I doubt not, still be received with Candour and Applause. The Publick would be agreeably surpris'd with the Revival of Poetry on the Theatre, and the Opportunity of employing all the best Performers, serious as well as comick, in one Piece, would render it still more likely to make a favourable Impression on the Audience. There is a Gentleman, not unequal to such a Task,

a Task, who was once tempted to begin a Piece of this Sort; but, I fear, he has too much Love of Ease and Indolence, and too little Ambition of literary Fame, ever to complete it.

But to conclude :

Have I, Sir, been wasting all this Ink and Time in vain? Or may it be hoped that you will extend some of that Care to the rest of our Old Authors, which you have so long bestowed on *Shakespeare*, and which you have so often lavished on many a worse Writer, than the most inferior of those here recommended to You? It is certainly your Interest to give Variety to the Publick Taste, and to diversify the Colour of our Dramatick Entertainments. Encourage new Attempts; but do Justice to the Old! The Theatre is a wide Field. Let not one or two Walks of it alone be beaten, but lay open the Whole to the Excursions of Genius! This, perhaps, might kindle a Spirit of Originality in our modern Writers for the Stage; who might be tempted to aim at more Novelty in their Compositions, when the Liberality of the Popular Taste rendered it less hazardous. That the Narrowness of theatrical Criticism might be enlarged I have no Doubt. Reflect, for a Moment, on the uncommon Success of *Romeo and Juliet* and *Every Man in his Humour*! and then tell me, whether there are not many other Pieces of as antient a Date, which, with the like proper Curtailments and Alterations, would produce the same Effect? Has an industrious Hand been at the Pains to scratch up the Dunghill of *Dryden's Amphitryon* for the few Pearls that are buried in it, and shall the rich Treasures of *Beaumont* and *Fletcher*, *Jonson*, and *Massinger*, lie (as it were) in the Ore, untouched and disregarded? Reform your List of Plays! In the Name of *Burbage*, *Taylor*, and *Betterton*, I conjure you to it! Let the veteran Criticks once more have the Satisfaction of seeing *the Maid's Tragedy*, *Philaster*, *King and no King*, &c. on the Stage!—Restore

Fletcher's

Fletcher's Elder Brother to the Rank unjustly usurped by *Cibber's Love makes a Man!* and since you have wisely desisted from giving an annual Affront to the City by acting *the London Cuckolds* on Lord-Mayor's Day, why will you not pay them a Compliment, by exhibiting *the City Madam* of *Massinger* on the same Occasion?

If after all, Sir, these Remonstrances should prove without Effect, and the Merit of these great Authors should plead with You in vain, I will here fairly turn my Back upon you, and address myself to the Lovers of Dramatick Compositions in general. They, I am sure, will peruse those Works with Pleasure in the Closet, though they lose the Satisfaction of seeing them represented on the Stage: Nay, should They, together with You, concur in determining that such Pieces are unfit to be acted, You, as well as They, will, I am confident, agree, that such Pieces are, at least, very worthy to be read. There are many Modern Compositions, seen with Delight at the Theatre, which sicken on the Taste in the Perusal; and the honest Country Gentleman, who has not been present at the Representation, wonders with what his *London* Friends have been so highly entertained, and is as much perplexed at the *Town-manner* of Writing as Mr. *Smith* in *the Rehearsal*. The Excellencies of our Old Writers are, on the contrary, not confined to Time and Place, but always bear about them the Evidences of true Genius.

Massinger is perhaps the least known, but not the least meritorious of any of the old Class of Writers. His Works declare him to be no mean Proficient in the same School. He possesses all the Beauties and Blemishes common to the Writers of that Age. He has, like the rest of them, in Compliance with the Custom of the Times, admitted Scenes of a low and gross Nature, which might be omitted with no more Prejudice to the Fable, than the Buffoonry in *Venice Preserved*.

Preserved. For his few Faults he makes ample Atonement. His Fables are, most of them, affecting; his Characters well conceived, and strongly supported; and his Diction, flowing, various, elegant, and manly. His two Plays, revived by *Beterton*, the *Bondman*, and the *Roman Actor*, are not, I think, among the Number of his best. *The Duke of Milan*, the *Renegado*, the *Picture*, the *Fatal Dowry*, the *Maid of Honour*, *A New Way to pay Old Debts*, the *Unnatural Combat*, the *Guardian*, the *City Madam*, are each of them, in my Mind, more excellent. He was a very popular Writer in his own Times, but so unaccountably, as well as unjustly, neglected at present, that the accurate Compilers of a Work called *The Lives of the Poets*, published under the learned Name of the late Mr. *Theophilus Cibber*, have not so much as mentioned him. He is, however, take him for all in all, an Author, whose Works the intelligent Reader will peruse with Admiration: And that I may not be supposed to withdraw my Plea for his Admission to the Modern Stage, I shall conclude these Reflections with one more Specimen of his Abilities; submitting it to all Judges of Theatrical Exhibitions, whether the most masterly Actor would not here have an Opportunity of displaying his Powers to Advantage.

The Extract I mean to subjoin is from the last Scene of the first Act of *the Duke of Milan*.—*Sforza*, having espoused the Cause of the King of *France* against the Emperor, on the King's Defeat, is advised by a Friend, to yield himself up to the Emperor's Discretion. He consents to this Measure, but provides for his Departure in the following Manner.

Sfor. ——— Stay you, *Francisco*.

—You see how Things stand with me?

Fran. To my Grief:

And if the Loss of my poor Life could be
A Sacrifice, to restore them as they were,
I willingly would lay it down.

Sfor. I think so ;

For I have ever found you true and thankful,
Which makes me love the Building I have rais'd,
In your Advancement ; and repent no Grace,
I have confer'd upon you : And, believe me,
Though now I should repeat my Favours to you,
The Titles I have given you, and the Means
Suitable to your Honours ; that I thought you
Worthy my Sister, and my Family,
And in my Dukedom made you next myself ;
It is not to upbraid you ; but to tell you
I find you're worthy of them, in your Love •
And Service to me.

Fran. Sir, I am your Creature ;
And any Shape that you would have me wear,
I gladly will put on.

Sfor. Thus, then, *Francisco* ;
I now am to deliver to your Trust
A weighty Secret, of so strange a Nature,
And 'twill, I know, appear so monstrous to you,
That you will tremble in the Execution,
As much as I am tortur'd to command it :
For 'tis a Deed so horrid, that, but to hear it,
Would strike into a Russian flesh'd in Murthers,
Or an obdurate Hangman, soft Compassion ;
And yet, *Francisco* (of all Men the dearest,
And from me most deserving) such my State
And strange Condition is, that Thou alone
Must know the fatal Service, and perform it.

Fran. These Preparations, Sir, to work a Stranger,
Or to one unacquainted with your Bounties,
Might appear useful ; but, to Me, they are
Needless Impertinencies : For I dare do
Whate'er You dare command.

Sfor. But thou must swear it,
And put into thy Oath, all Joys, or Torments
That fright the Wicked, or confirm the Good :
Not to conceal it only (that is nothing)
But, whensoever my Will shall speak, strike now !
To fall upon't like Thunder,

Fran. Minister
The Oath in any Way, or Form you please,
I stand resolv'd to take it.

Sfor. Thou must do, then,
What no malevolent Star will dare to look on,

It is so wicked : For which, Men will curse Thee
 For being the Instrument ; and the blest Angels
 Forsake Me at my Need, for being the Author :
 For 'tis a Deed of Night, of Night, *Francisco*,
 In which the Memory of all good Actions,
 We can pretend to, shall be buried quick :
 Or, if we be remember'd, it shall be
 To fright Posterity by our Example,
 That have out-gone all Precedents of Villains
 That were before us ; and such as succeed,
 Though taught in Hell's black School, shall ne'er come near
 —Art thou not shaken yet ? [us.]

Fran. I grant you move me :
 But to a Man confirm'd——

Sfor. I'll try your Temper :
 What think you of my Wife ?

Fran. As a Thing sacred :
 To whose fair Name, and Memory, I pay gladly
 These Signs of Duty.

[Kneels.]

Sfor. Is she not the Abstract
 Of all that's rare, or to be wish'd in Woman ?

Fran. It were a Kind of Blasphemy to dispute it :
 —But to the Purpose, Sir.

Sfor. Add too her Goodness,
 Her Tenderneſs of me, her Care to please me,
 Her unsuspected Chastity, ne'er equal'd,
 Her Innocence, her Honour—O I am lost
 In the Ocean of her Virtues, and her Graces,
 When I think of them.

Fran. Now I find the End
 Of all your Conjurations : There's some Service
 To be done for this sweet Lady. If she have Enemies
 That she would have remov'd——

Sfor. Alas ! *Francisco*,
 Her greatest Enemy is her greatest Lover ;
 Yet, in that Hatred, her Idolator.
 One Smile of her's would make a Savage tame ;
 One Accent of that 'Tongue would calm the Seas,
 Though all the Winds at once strove there for Empire.
 Yet I, for whom she thinks all this too little,
 Should I miscarry in this present Journey,
 (From whence it is all Number to a Cypher,
 I ne'er return with Honour) by thy Hand
 Must have her murder'd.

Fran.

Fran. Murther'd !—She that loves so,
And so deserves to be belov'd again ?
And I, who sometimes you were pleas'd to favour,
Pick'd out the Instrument ?

Sfor. Do not fly off :
What is decreed, can never be recall'd.
'Tis more than Love to Her, that marks Her out
A wish'd Companion to me, in both Fortunes :
And strong Assurance of thy zealous Faith,
That gives up to thy Trust a Secret, that
Racks should not have forc'd from me.—O *Francisco*,
There is no Heav'n without Her ; nor a Hell,
Where She resides. I ask from Her but Justice,
And what I would have paid to Her, had Sickness,
Or any other Accident divorc'd
Her purer Soul from her unspotted Body.
The slavish *Indian* Princes, when they die,
Are chearfully attended to the Fire
By the Wife, and Slave, that living they lov'd best,
To do them Service in another World :
Nor will I be less honour'd, that love more.
And therefore trifle not, but in thy Looks
Express a ready Purpose to perform
What I command ; or, by *Marcelia's* Soul,
This is thy latest Minute.

Fran. 'Tis not Fear
Of Death, but Love to you, makes me embrace it.
But, for mine own Security, when 'tis done,
What Warrant have I ? If you please to sign one,
I shall, though with Unwillingness and Horror,
Perform your dreadful Charge.

Sfor. I will, *Francisco* :
But still remember, that a Prince's Secrets
Are Balm, conceal'd ; but Poison, if discover'd.
I may come back ; then this is but a Trial,
To purchase thee, if it were possible,
A nearer Place in my Affection—but
I know thee honest.

Fran. 'Tis a Character
I will not part with.

Sfor. I may live to reward it.

[*Exeunt.*]



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